

EDMUND MUSKIE: VIETNAM

The U.S. Buildup 1965-68

"The right to have a voice in the development of public policy carries with it a responsibility for the results of that policy."

Moratorium Day Speech
Bates College, Lewiston, Maine
October 15, 1969

"In the past, most of the public utterances about Vietnam have warned the American public of the dire consequences of American failure there."

Senate Speech
CR 11/7/69

As an early supporter of the Johnson Administration's escalation policy in Vietnam, Senator Muskie is quite correct in both of his remarks listed above.

In a speech in Philadelphia on February 28, 1966 the Senator explained both the justification for and ultimate objectives of the increased U.S. involvement in that Southeast Asian country.

"There was very great uneasiness in all Southeast Asia (in the Fall of 1965) as to the consequences for Southeast Asian countries of a complete U.S. withdrawal; and the strengthened American presence of recent months has been a source of reassurance to them."

"The most important new factor in the war in 1965 was the introduction of large numbers of U.S. troops and their direct entry into combat. The second important new factor was the bombing of targets in North Vietnam....The presence of U.S. combat forces has acted to arrest the deterioration in general security in Government-controlled parts of South Vietnam. The ability of the Vietnamese Government to hold Saigon...and certain other key areas has improved. There has been an improvement of morale in the Government and the armed forces. There has been a return of confidence among Vietnamese civilians. Politically and commercially minded Vietnamese have found renewed courage and confidence....

"I don't believe that we really doubt our capacity to manage the war in South Vietnam and to convince Hanoi that the conference table is the best course for North Vietnam...."

"There is no question in my mind but that all of them (Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia) would eventually fall under Chinese

domination and control if the United States withdraws or is driven from South Vietnam."

Later in his speech Muskie listed 5 alternative courses of U.S. action in Vietnam and the arguments pro and con for each.

Senator Muskie chose the fifth alternative which was:

"The application of unremitting pressure in a carefully measured response to the aggression of the enemy. This is as I understand the policy of the administration. This course was carefully defined by General Taylor before the Foreign Relations Committee. It is the course which I believe can hold the greatest support in the Senate. It is the course which I think makes most sense.

"If we mean what I think we mean - to convince our adversary that a continuation of the war is unacceptable in his own interests - then let us do so in a way that will make our policy and our national will clear and credible to him. Let him not miscalculate either. Only when he is no longer in doubt on this point will he begin to doubt the wisdom of his current course...

"It is not our objective to conquer any country or to destroy an regime. It is to stop aggression in South Vietnam. Why? The reasons include the same reasons which prompted us to take a stand in Iran, immediately following World War II, in Greece and Turkey, in Berlin in Korea, in Cuba.

"We believe that containment of expansionist communism regrettably involves direct confrontation from time to time and that to retreat from it is to undermine the prospects for stability and peace.

We believe that the credibility of our word and our purpose as a nation is at stake; and that its loss would be an enormous setback for the forces of freedom.

"What is happening in South Vietnam, in Southeast Asia, and its outcome, will exert a strong influence on the shape of the next Asia and its impact upon the lives of hundreds of millions of Asian people and the stability of the world as a whole....

"Is it in our interest to try to contribute to such an objective? I believe so."

Remarks before Philadelphia
Allied Jewish Appeal
February 28, 1966
CR 3/1/66

In the Fall of 1966 Muskie addressed the Parliamentary Conference of the British Commonwealth Nations. He said:

"What would be the implications if tomorrow the President of the United States were to say to the rest of the world 'We withdraw (from Vietnam)'? If, instead of posing this as a hypothetical possibility, you did not expect to come true you had to face it as a reality, what would you say?

"We have no choice (but to contemplate such a question) because we must make the decision to withdraw or to stay. If we make the decision to withdraw, we have to contemplate the implications, not as someone counseling another country but as someone responsible for the results."

Speech, Parliamentary Conference
of the British Commonwealth Nations.

One year later Muskie stressed that world opinion must not be allowed to deter us from formulating foreign policies involving our national interest.

"Today, curiously enough, many of those who oppose our involvement in Southeast Asia are the same people who supported our involvement in Europe, in World War II and during the Marshall Plan, those who support our participation in the United Nations and those who believe in peace through common action...

"In making our (foreign policy) decisions, we must, of course, give consideration to world opinion. But in doing so we cannot afford to abandon our own views of the world - or our own national interest.

"There are many areas in which we must choose among unhappy alternatives, none of which are without risk to our national interest. The most critical, of course, is South Vietnam today....

"And yet, as Americans, as citizens of the world's greatest power, we must exercise the responsibility of choice. Let us, as citizens, always try to evaluate the choices of our decision-makers, conscious of the implications, sensitive to the unknowns, aware of the risks, and prepared to accept the consequences of our errors. Unless we as citizens exercise this kind of oversight; this kind of restraint and understanding, we cannot expect our country to be as wise as she must be to meet the challenges ahead."

(Emphasis added)
Speech, St. Fidelis College
Herman, Pennsylvania
February 3, 1967

Adhering to his annual schedule, in January 1968, Senator Muskie succinctly summarized the issues and objectives of our involvement:

"Two clear-cut issues are involved in Vietnam:

1. The right of the South Vietnamese people to determine their own destiny.
2. The use of the so-called national wars of liberators as a technique of communist expansion.

"To support the first and to resist the second, we are involved in a war of limited objectives - with a limited application of our military power. We do not seek territory, or bases, or the destruction of North Vietnam."

Interview for Japanese Broadcasting Co., January 16, 1968
CR 1/18/68

And just prior to election day Muskie said:

"I'm certain of only one thing. In common with all Americans I want to see that war ended with reasonable safeguards for all the South Vietnamese people to determine their own futures in the years ahead."

Speech, Democrat Dinner
New York City
November 1, 1968

II. Muskie on Negotiations

A Northern New England Horse Trader

In negotiations "both sides have to give away points, but frankly, as a northern New England horse trader, I don't believe in giving away points unless you see something coming back."

Speech, Washington Hilton Hotel
September 5, 1968
Washington Post, 9/6/68

Quid pro quo

"...we must get something out of our withdrawal that will serve the national elements, the freedom elements and the independence elements in South Vietnam."

Congressional Record 2/24/66

U.S. Peace Initiatives and the Paris Talks

Since January, 1969 Senator Muskie has been critical of the Nixon Administration's efforts to obtain a just peace in Vietnam.

"I believe that the President's Vietnamization policy can only be a formula for the perpetuation of the war. Because it is basically a strategy for continuing the fighting it cannot bring peace to Vietnam and it cannot get us out of Vietnam."

..."I have suggested that the President should consider the formal offer of a standstill cease-fire to the other side. I think that kind of offer coupled with the unqualified offer of free elections, which unfortunately, has not been qualified by President Thieu, could serve as an additional initiative which might just possibly move the other side another step or two toward a negotiated settlement. It is this sort of thing to which we must address ourselves: What meaningful steps can we take in our interests, and those we seek to protect, to advance the possibility of a negotiated settlement? New and continuing initiatives in this direction - an escalation of our efforts to achieve an end to the fighting and a political settlement rather than an escalation in the fighting - should be our objective."

CR S 8419
7/23/69

"In disregarding the Paris negotiations the President is making his most fundamental mistake....

"Serious bargaining is precluded so long as both Saigon and Hanoi believe that our real aim is to stay in Vietnam indefinitely and preserve the Thieu-Ky regime."

Speech, National Press Club
March 5, 1970

"President Nixon by failing to appoint a replacement for Henry Cabot Lodge seems to be saying he is not involved in the diplomatic effort in Paris.

"He seems to have abandoned that effort. But we have to begin by pursuing the areas of negotiations now open to us. The talks in Paris offer a diplomatic forum."

Press Conference
San Francisco, California
S.F. Chronicle 3/31/70

"The time has come and indeed is long since past, when we should move to create the conditions that will permit the political settlement which is the only hope for peace in Southeast Asia. It will require that we send to Paris a high-ranking negotiator with direct and acknowledged access to the President. It will require that we make clear to the Saigon government that they can no longer rely on American military power to postpone forever their need to recognize the realities of political power in South Vietnam."

Congressional Record S6176
4/23/70

"...the President must develop a proposal that is negotiable, a proposal which will create the necessary climate for a settlement of those differences. Specifically, I have in mind our trying to negotiate a U.S. withdrawal timetable, and coupling this with an informal arrangement regarding the withdrawal of North Vietnam forces and a reduction in the level of violence.

"There is some reason to believe that Hanoi would be receptive to such an approach."

Speech, National Press Club
Washington, D. C. March 5, 1970

Senator Muskie, however, has a history of doubts about Hanoi's "receptiveness."

"Our policy in Vietnam is the product not only of the (Johnson) Administration and its advisers, but of its critics...

"The critics asked for a cease-fire. It was provided.

"They asked for a lengthy bombing pause. It was provided.

"They asked that the controversy be put before the United Nations. This was done.

"They called for our reaffirmation of the Geneva accords and our request for the reconvening of the Geneva Convention nations to act as intermediaries. This was done.

"They called for a vigorous peace offensive. This has been our consistent policy.

"They asked that we abide by free elections in Vietnam. We have agreed to do that.

"They have asked that the war be limited to military targets and rigorous efforts have been exerted to do just that.

"This is but a partial list of the steps we have taken to indicate our flexibility and our desire for a negotiated settlement rather than a military 'victory'.

"To the suggestions that we cease bombing in the north, we have indicated our willingness to do so the moment we are assured, privately or otherwise, that this step will be answered promptly by a corresponding and appropriate de-escalation on the other side.

"To the suggestion that North Vietnam may fear that we intend to establish a permanent military presence in Vietnam, we have offered 'to agree to a time schedule for supervised phased withdrawal from South Vietnam of all external forces.'

"To the suggestion that the Viet Cong take part in the negotiations, we have said that 'this question would not be an insurmountable problem.'

"There has been no remotely comparable response from Hanoi to any of these initiatives. And yet, there has been criticism that we have ignored indications of a desire to negotiate."

(Emphasis added)
Remarks, St. Fidelis College
February 3, 1967
CR 2/8/67

"...simple words are not enough unless they are backed up by some overt, objective evidence that they (North Vietnam) mean what they say. They have said they are for peace before and yet we got no reflection of that on the battlefield or in South Vietnam. So in a sense there has got to be ... in addition to words, some concrete evidence in the field that will reflect a good faith intention on their part to move toward substantive negotiations...

"We are never going to get a negotiated settlement unless the enemy decides that such a settlement is in its interests and we don't know that the enemy has made that decision."

Issues and Answers
9/15/68

While appearing before the National Press Club on October 1, 1968, Senator Muskie was asked what Hubert Humphrey would do if his proposal to halt all bombing did not move North Vietnam into substantive peace talks. Muskie replied:

"There are two things we don't know. First, we don't know if the other side is committed to a negotiated settlement as being in its own best interest. Second, assuming such a commitment has been made, then what do we do to get them moving toward a negotiated settlement?

"No one....on our side can pinpoint the answer to that question. It's in the minds of the enemy."

New York Times 10/2/68

III. On Jeopardizing the Paris Talks

Throughout the 1968 campaign Senator Muskie emphasized the importance of none of the candidates saying anything that might jeopardize the progress of negotiations in Paris.

On September 6 he said Hanoi might construe such statements as "repudiation of the President" and that such remarks would be a "disservice" to the country.

Baltimore Sun 9/7/68

"Sure it would be nice if all we were dealing with is a problem in a classroom that has no impact on our national policies or our men in South Vietnam...but we (Muskie and HHH) don't want by anything we say to jeopardize the talks."

Speech, New Haven, Connecticut
October 22, 1968
Washington Post 10/23/68

In Chicago, Muskie said he would not endanger negotiations "for the purpose of appearing to give you a frank, honest, open answer..."

"Would you rather have a frank exposure about what is going on in Paris now? Or would you rather have a cease-fire?"

"I'm not going to be goaded into it. I want to see a cease-fire." (After the program ended, reporters questioned the Senator as to what he meant by the term "cease-fire" Muskie replied, "Oh don't make anything of that. Nothing I said here is relevant to what is going on.")

Speech, Headline Club
Chicago, Illinois
October 17, 1968

Since the 1968 campaign Muskie has continued to press for a negotiated settlement. Some of his statements, however, do not show the same regard for the jeopardy of the talks that he expressed at that time.

"If I were on the other side I would say the President is not interested in negotiations. He just talks about it as a cloak for another initiative."

Congressional Record S5695
5/11/70

"Silent Americans are assuming that Mr. Nixon is really getting us out of Vietnam. The truth of the matter is that he is pinning us down indefinitely."

Speech, National Press Club
March 5, 1970

IV. Bombing Halts

In his speech at St. Fidelis College in February 1967, Muskie noted that the U.S. in the past had halted the bombing of North Vietnam in an effort to bring about peace talks.

During the 1968 campaign a cessation of the bombing was a much discussed issue:

In his remarks before the Democratic Platform Committee in Chicago on August 19, 1968, Muskie said:

"On the basis of information available to me, I believe a bombing halt at this time, as a test of North Vietnam's intention and as a further demonstration of our willingness to take the initiative toward peace, may be justified. However, a final judgement depends upon the degree of risk which would be involved for our troops in the field if we were to halt the bombing, as well as upon the evidence available of the possibility of a good faith response on the part of the other side. This is a decision which the President must make."

(Emphasis added)

In Indianapolis Muskie was asked whether stopping the bombing would not "play into the hands of the Communists?" Muskie responded:

"That's exactly what I meant when I said we must have a meaningful movement toward peace before the bombing halt is used."

New York Times 9/10/68

At the University of Kansas Muskie said he "would be willing to lean in the direction of taking the risk "of a bombing halt if it would move the U.S. to the end of the fighting and a political settlement of the war."

Washington Post 9/21/68

And yet when discussing President Johnson's halt of March 31, 1968, Muskie reached the same conclusion that he had stated 20 months previously.

"I'm sure of only one thing, that the bombing halt of March 31 did not achieve what we hoped it would do..."

"I think all of us felt that the 90 per cent halt was a substantial recognition of the proposition that we made, that we were hopeful it would have the result we felt it might. Well it did not."

Baltimore Sun 10/5/68

V. Withdrawal

Muskie - Vietnam

"... I think there is a deepening conviction in America that we need to end our involvement in Vietnam. I don't think we can end it with a precipitate withdrawal but I think we must be committed to a withdrawal, that Saigon ought to understand this, that Saigon ought to know what our timetable is, and that at the same time we ought to be pressing in some way for a resolution of the political issues that are involved.

We must be committed to withdrawal by a target date that, whether or not is announced, is final."

New York Times 11/30/69

VI. ARVN Capabilities

"The South Vietnamese forces have improved over the years, but this improvement also serves to point up how far they have to go. They still avoid night patrolling. Their officer corps is still widely regarded as incompetent. Promotions to officer rank are still based on social status. Desertions still run as high as 10,000 per month."

National Press Club
3/5/70

"We have bought the Vietnamese five years of time, and I don't think we can afford to buy them any more. I am confident that the Vietnamese can fight their own war."

(Emphasis added)
Press Conference, Holy Cross College
Worcester, Massachusetts,
May 1, 1970
Portland Press Herald 5/2/70

VII. Our National Interest

Contrary to remarks made during the years of the Johnson Administration, Senator Muskie now believes that U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia is not in our national interest. In a Senate speech the Senator said:

"The way to restore our reputation and influence as the world's first-ranking power is not by investment in a fifth-ranking interest....

"The overriding fact is that our national interest demands not that we do more, but that we do less in Southeast Asia."

(Emphasis added)
Congressional Record S6954
May 11, 1970

VIII. The Future and Past According to Muskie

"I am not optimistic about ending this war by any of the means available to us, or apparently available to us. Military, diplomatic, Geneva Conference, United Nations. But the important point is that we understand or have a clear understanding what we think is the best culmination of our effort there."

(Emphasis added)
Issues and Answers
4/26/70

"Time has changed our perspective on conditions in Vietnam. What once seemed clear is now uncertain. What once could be described in terms of black and white is now grey."

(Emphasis added)
Speech, Moratorium Day
Bates College, Lewiston, Me.
October 15, 1969